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US takes a harder look at weapons in space

Team of scientists, engineers, and strategists
says military potential should be quickly developed

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An issue with strong "Star Wars" overtones is being addressed with great urgency in Washington. This is the development of space-based weapons to counter a perceived lead by the Soviet Union and defend against strategic nuclear weapons.

This controversial notion has been brought into sharper focus in recent weeks with the debate here over a nuclear "freeze" and whether the US and its allies should renounce the first use of such weapons. Recent developments:

- US intelligence information — inadvertently made public in congressional testimony — indicates the Soviet Union is considerably ahead of the US in developing space-based laser weaponry.

- A report this week by the General Accounting Office agrees that the Soviet Union's high-energy laser program is several times larger than that of the US. The GAO says such a program has "long-range military potential" (likening it to the invention of the wheel and computers) and should be broadened and accelerated.

- A team of scientists, engineers, economists, and military strategists — headed by a former Defense Intelligence Agency chief, Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham — says the US should move quickly to develop the military potential of space. This group urges the development of a "multisatellite global ballistic missile defense system" that could inter-

cept and destroy enemy ICBMs before they reach their targets.

Even within the Pentagon, there are strong differences of opinion about the uses and likelihood of "space war." Some officials played down the recent comment of Richard De Lauer (head of research and engineering at the Pentagon) to members of Congress that the Soviet Union would be able to threaten US satellites in space "as early as 1983-1988" and attack ground targets "in the early 1990s."

But congressional interest has been sparked, especially since the administration continues to search for a home for its highly accurate MX missile. The administration has hiked funding for ballistic missile and space defense research. Congress might increase this further, especially with the new information from its watchdog agency.

The GAO released a digest of its classified report this week, greater detail of which

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is revealed in the current issue of Aviation Week & Space Technology.

"A constellation of laser weapon platforms in space," says the GAO, "has the potential to provide a credible air and ballistic missile defense system — emerging tech-

nology has progressed to the point at which its military use is relatively clear."

The GAO urges the Pentagon to give greater priority and funding to developing a space-based laser program.

Such a program also is a key part of the recommendations made by General Graham and the group he headed under the auspices of the Heritage Foundation.

They offer a "layered strategic defense," including: "a cheap and simple point defense of the US missile silos, then a spaceborne capability to destroy hostile missiles on the rise, and finally a spaceborne capability to intercept reentry vehicles in midcourse." Such a program, it is estimated, would cost \$35 billion. It includes ground-based antiballistic projectiles to defend US strategic missiles, infrared homing weapons fired from space, and laser weapons.

General Graham's group says this effort constitutes a basic change in US strategy "from the bankrupt and basically immoral precepts of mutual assured destruction, to a stable and morally defensible strategy of assured survival."

In a guest article in this newspaper last week (April 7), physicist Kosta Tsipis said, "Proposals for the erection of a laser antiballistic missile defense in space sound like little more than childlike, wishful fantasies of omnipotence."

Dr. Tsipis (codirector of the Program in Science and Technology for International Security at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) says it would take 100 years and \$100 billion just to transport sufficient amounts of laser fuel to space-based platforms.